

OPINION

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Blame Game Doesn't Fix Water in Flint

Children continue to suffer harm

BY MARIAN WRIGHT EDELMAN

America's political blame game continues while children continue to suffer life impairing harm. The nation was riveted last week as Michigan Gov. Rick Snyder and Environmental Protection Agency Chief Gina McCarthy were grilled over the shameful inaction on the Flint, Mich. water crisis by members of the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee.



blame before the problem is fixed and the poor children and families of Flint have fresh, clean water to drink and cook with and bathe in? Tick, tock, tick tock.

During the months following the governor-appointed emergency manager's reckless April 2014 decision to switch its water supply from Lake Huron and Detroit's system to the Flint River corrosive water as a cost-saving measure – never mind its health and life threat-

stopped using Flint's water in its manufacturing plant in October 2014 and told the city it was too corrosive for its car parts was a full year before authorities admitted and warned people not to drink, cook with, or bathe in it. Tick, tock, tick tock, tick tock.

The state's quiet and late action in January of last year to provide bottled water just for its Flint employees was 10 months before children and families were warned. The EPA failed to act for

America is disposable. Tick, tock, tick tock, tick tock.

Lead causes biological and neurological damage linked to brain damage, learning disabilities, behavioral problems, developmental delays, academic failure, juvenile delinquency, high blood pressure and death. Pregnant women, babies, and young children are especially vulnerable because of developing child brains and nervous systems. Tick, tock, tick tock, tick tock.

For the Flint children exposed to lead including 9,000 preschoolers, local, state and federal help is needed right now. While lead poisoning is irreversible, some steps can decrease its effects. Gov. Snyder failed horribly in his response to the crisis, but has now proposed funding for safe drinking water, food and nutrition, physical, social and educational enrichment programs, and water bill relief.

Earlier this month, the Department of Health and Human Services approved his request for a Medicaid and CHIP waiver from the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services to raise income eligibility standards to enable 15,000 more pregnant women and children in Flint to receive program benefits. Approximately 30,000 current Medicaid beneficiaries in the area also are now eligible for

expanded services under this new waiver agreement

The federal government has also expanded funding to enable Flint's Head Start and Early Head Start programs to serve every eligible child. These programs will now provide comprehensive early learning, health, and family well-being services to 1,011 Head Start children and 166 Early Head Start children in the city of Flint.

I and so many others are beyond angry that the lead in the water in Flint would have been addressed much more quickly if the majority of the child victims had not been poor and black. Children and families everywhere would benefit immediately from stronger, clearer and consistent national standards for measuring, monitoring, and reducing lead exposure that are enforced. The incalculable child harm from lead poisoning should be reason enough to act now with great urgency and persistence.

Flint's poor children, sacrificial canaries in the coal mine, must be helped and all children in America must be prevented from suffering their fate. No child in America is disposable. A child has only one life to live and it is today. Tick, tock, tick tock, tick tock.

Marian Wright Edelman is president of the Children's Defense Fund.

For the Flint children exposed to lead including 9,000 preschoolers, local, state and federal help is needed right now.

ening impact on the children and citizens of Flint – and the delayed decision to tell residents to stop drinking the water in October, the crisis in Flint has too many shameful moments to recount at so many levels.

Authorities disregarded or hid evidence and misled residents who could clearly see, taste, and smell the problem for themselves and put the city's financial concerns ahead of concerns for child and adult life and well-being. The revelation that General Motors

months after it knew that lack of corrosion controls in the city's water supply could put residents at risk of lead poisoning. Michigan's Department of Environmental Quality failed to heed EPA's private warnings for months that corrosion controls were needed to prevent a risk to public health. A state-employed nurse reportedly dismissively told a Flint mother whose son was diagnosed with an elevated blood lead level: "It is just a few IQ points. ... It is not the end of the world." No child in

Waking up in Jail and Not Remembering How I Got There

My story inspires others to work for change

BY TAMISHA WALKER

Black women today yield significant political power as the most reliable Democratic voters. Yet, despite growing political importance, they score at the very bottom when it comes to virtually every economic indicator from education to lifetime earnings to household wealth.

Some past history that shapes black women's lives just aren't changing fast enough. I grew up with no father and an addicted mother. I raised myself, became a mother at 15, dropped out of school, and struggled to support my child and siblings. It was a dark time. Living with poverty, surrounded by substance abuse and being neglected, I didn't think



much about the future. But nothing was as dark as waking up in a jail cell without remembering how I got there.

More than 1 million women are behind bars in the United States.

Two thirds are women of color, and more than a third of those incarcerated for drug offenses. Eighty-five percent have been victims of violence, rape, sexual assault, neglect and child abuse.

A recent report shows that over the past two decades, the percentage of girls growing up the way I did who get prison sentences jumped from 20 percent to 50 percent. The number of women in prison is now rising at nearly double the rate for men. Many of these women are mothers criminalized for being addicted while pregnant. Last year, Tennessee passed a law that made it a crime to be addicted while pregnant.

The right intervention for addiction is treatment, not prison, but women of color disproportion-

ately get punishment instead of treatment. Girls of color who have lived with abuse are more likely to be labeled as offenders than white girls.

I was arrested 19 times before I turned 18. No adult ever asked what was wrong or what was leading me down this road of bad decisions and bad consequences. There was no intervention before going to prison, while in prison, or even after -- when it could have helped accelerate the healing of my family. Most incarcerated women have little or no access to drug treatment, even though nearly 75 percent of them were using drugs before their arrest. Nor is there much available treatment to help abused women recover.

There's also little counseling or parenting education for incarcerated women, even though most inside, like myself, are mothers. And there's scant legal or advocate support for women coming out of prison and seeking to regain custody of their children.

Like men, women coming

home face employment challenges, but they often face more even barriers in getting assistance for themselves and their kids if they've been convicted of a drug offense.

In the six years since I came home from jail, I have earned my GED, obtained an associate's degree, and become an advocate for changing policies to better serve people returning home after incarceration. I've reunited with my sons and keep them close, assuring them they won't experience the life I knew at their ages. I'm a trained advocate, mediator, mentor and leader in the fight to end mass incarceration.

Had I known that in my state, California, 54 percent of drug-related prison sentences go to women of color, even though women of color are only 38 percent of the population, I wouldn't have been so surprised to end up in prison like growing numbers of other young women.

My story inspires others to work for change, too. But it's an

uphill fight, especially for women. I've been there, and know it takes more than inspiration, vision and dreams to change Black history.

My work now focuses on redefining public safety by helping people being released from jails and prison to become whole in our society. My goal is reduce recidivism by dealing with conditions that led to incarceration to begin with, and facilitating recovery from the pain and disenfranchisement of incarceration and the conditions that led to it.

A record number of women of color in prison is becoming part of our shared black history, a by-product of systemic racism, sexism, and oppression that continues to persist. My story is evidence that history doesn't have to be our destiny; it's time to address the past so we can build a future worth celebrating for black women.

Tamisha Walker is the lead community organizer at the Safe Return Project in Richmond, Calif., and a formerly incarcerated mother of two boys.